



JEAN BAUDRILLARD

WHY HASN'T EVERYTHING ALREADY DISAPPEARED ?

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FOREWORD

He that hath not, from him shall
be taken even that which he hath
(Matthew 25: 29).¹

‘Why is there nothing rather than something?’
This is Leibniz’s question, exactly reversed. It is
also a radical way of taking one’s leave of meta-
physics.

The focus is not now on being, but on the nothing.
Macedonio Fernandez, the Argentinian writer

and friend of Borges, had already taken the exploration of the nothing to great lengths: 'Everything on—and including—the Nothing, just on the Nothing, but not entirely. On the Nothing, there is more: some of its interstices, which are numerous.'² Jean Baudrillard pushes its limits even further and saturates the interstices. It's a question of being logical. We imagined that Good was the product of eliminating Evil, the Eternal the product of eliminating the Temporal or the All the product of eliminating the Nothing. Always this totalitarian temptation to unify, to reduce duality, to eliminate Evil, to exterminate the nothing. We have rid ourselves of the ambiguity of the world.

We have to learn to dance with the nothing; this is the great game and the grand style: 'the Nothing is as essential to life as are air and wind to the flight of the dove,'³ a reference to Kant's 'light dove' which imagines it would fly better if it could overcome all resistance.

Nihilism? No, nihilism is precisely the forgetting of the nothing. It is the system that is nihilistic through its power to consign everything to indifference. The system is 'truly negationist', to use Baudrillard's expression, since it is a denial of the nothing, a denial of all illusion. There remains the challenge of radical thought which gambles on the world being illusion, which hypothesizes that there is perhaps nothing rather than something and which 'hunts down the nothing that runs beneath the apparent continuity of meaning'.

This isn't a contrary metaphysics, but the contrary of a metaphysics.

François L'Yvonnet

When I speak of time, it is not yet
When I speak of a place, it has disappeared
When I speak of a man, he's already dead
When I speak of time, it already is no more⁴

LET US SPEAK, then, of the world from which
human beings have disappeared.

It's a question of disappearance, not exhaustion, extinction or extermination. The exhaustion of resources, the extinction of species—these are physical processes or natural phenomena.

And that's the whole difference. The human species is doubtless the only one to have invented a specific mode of disappearance that has nothing to do with Nature's law. Perhaps even an art of disappearance.

LET'S BEGIN WITH the disappearance of the real. We have talked enough about the murder of reality in the age of the media, virtual reality and networks, without enquiring to any great degree when the real began to exist. If we look closely, we see that the real world begins, in the modern age, with the decision to transform the world, and to do so by means of science, analytical knowledge and the implementation of technology—that is to say that it begins, in Hannah Arendt's words, with the invention of an Archimedean point outside the world (on the basis of the invention of the telescope by Galileo and the discovery of modern mathematical calculation) by which the natural world is definitively alienated.⁵

This is the moment when human beings, while setting about analysing and transforming the world, take their leave of it, while at the same time lending it force of reality. We may say, then, that the real world begins, paradoxically, to disappear at the very same time as it begins to exist.

By their exceptional faculty for knowledge, human beings, while giving meaning, value and reality to the world, at the same time begin a process of dissolution ('to analyse' means literally 'to dissolve').

But doubtless we have to go back even further—as far as concepts and language. By representing things to ourselves, by naming them and conceptualizing them, human beings call them into existence and at the same time hasten their doom, subtly detach them from their brute reality. For example, the class struggle exists from the moment Marx names it. But it no doubt exists in its greatest intensity only before being named.

Afterwards, it merely declines. The moment a thing is named, the moment representation and concepts take hold of it, is the moment when it begins to lose its energy—with the risk that it will become a truth or impose itself as ideology. We may say the same of the Unconscious and its discovery by Freud. It is when a thing is beginning to disappear that the concept appears.

The owl, says Hegel, flies out at dusk.⁶

Take globalization: if there is so much talk of it, as obvious fact, as indisputable reality, that is perhaps because it is already no longer at its height and we are already contending with something else.

Thus the real vanishes into the concept. But what is even more paradoxical is the exactly opposite movement by which concepts and ideas (but also phantasies, utopias, dreams and desires) vanish into their very fulfilment. When everything disappears by excess of reality, when, thanks to the deployment of a limitless technology, both



mental and material, human beings are capable of fulfilling all their potentialities and, as a consequence, disappear, giving way to an artificial world that expels them from it, to an integral performance that is, in a sense, the highest stage of materialism. (Marx: the idealist stage of interpretation, and the irresistible transformation that leads to a world without us.) That world is perfectly objective since there is no one left to see it. Having become purely operational, it no longer has need of our representation. Indeed, there no longer is any possible representation of it.

For, if what is proper to human beings is not to realize all their possibilities, it is of the essence of the technical object to exhaust its possibilities and even to go quite some way beyond them, staking out in that way the definitive demarcation line between technical objects and human beings, to the point of deploying an infinite operational potential against human beings themselves and implying, sooner or later, their disappearance.

Thus, the modern world foreseen by Marx, driven on by the work of the negative, by the engine of contradiction, became, by the very excess of its fulfilment, another world in which things no longer even need their opposites in order to exist, in which light no longer needs shade, the feminine no longer needs the masculine (or vice versa?), good no longer needs evil—and the world no longer needs us.

It is here we see that the mode of disappearance of the human (and naturally of everything related to it—Günther Anders' outdatedness of human beings,⁷ the eclipse of values, etc.) is precisely the product of an internal logic, of a built-in obsolescence, of the human race's fulfilment of its most grandiose project, the Promethean project of mastering the universe, of acquiring exhaustive knowledge. We see, too, that it is this which precipitates it towards its disappearance, much more quickly than animal species, by the acceleration it imparts to an



evolution that no longer has anything natural about it.

Doing so not out of some death drive or some involutive, regressive disposition toward undifferentiated forms, but from an impulse to go as far as possible in the expression of all its power, all its faculties—to the point even of dreaming of abolishing death.

Now, what is most surprising is that this amounts to the same thing. This extreme endeavour on the part of life (or of Eros, if, by that term, one understands the deployment of all capacities, the deepening of knowledge, consciousness and *jouissance*) arrives at the same outcome: the virtual disappearance of the human species, as though that destiny were programmed somewhere and we were merely the long-term executants of the programme (which irresistibly brings to mind *apoptosis*, that process by which a cell is pre-programmed to die).

All this may give the impression or illusion of a fatal strategy, of an evolution at the end of which we would have passed beyond that vanishing point Canetti speaks of, where, without realizing it, the human race would have left reality and history behind, where any distinction between the true and the false would have disappeared, etc.⁸

In which case we and our bodies would be merely the phantom limb, the weak link, the infantile malady of a technological apparatus that dominates us remotely (just as thought would be merely the infantile malady of AI or the human being the infantile malady of the machine or the real the infantile malady of the virtual). All this remains confined still within an evolutionary perspective that sees everything in terms of a linear trajectory, from origin to end, from cause to effect, from birth to death, from appearance to disappearance.

But disappearance may be conceived differently: as a singular event and the object of a specific desire, the desire no longer to be there, which is not negative at all. Quite to the contrary, disappearance may be the desire to see what the world looks like in our absence (photography) or to see, beyond the end, beyond the subject, beyond all meaning, beyond the horizon of disappearance, if there still is an occurrence of the world, an unprogrammed appearance of things. A domain of pure appearance, of the world as it is (and not of the *real* world, which is only ever the world of representation), which can emerge only from the disappearance of all the added values.

There are here the first fruits of an art of disappearance, of another strategy. The dissolution of values, of the real, of ideologies, of ultimate ends.

But there is simultaneously a game, the possibility of playing with all these things; the possibility of an art, though not in any way an art in

the cultural and aesthetic sense, but something closer to a martial art.

Art itself in the modern period exists only on the basis of its disappearance—not just the art of making the real disappear and supplanting it with another scene, but the art of abolishing itself in the course of its practice (Hegel). It was by doing this that it constituted an event, that it was of decisive importance. I say 'was' advisedly, for art today, though it has disappeared, doesn't know it has disappeared and—this is the worst of it—continues on its trajectory in a vegetative state.

And becomes the paradigm of everything that survives its own disappearance. There are those who play on their disappearance, make use of it as a living form, exploit it by excess, and there are those who are in a state of disappearance and who survive it by default. It is clear that the political scene, for example, merely reflects the shadows of a cave and the—disembodied—



beings that move around in it, but do so quite unwittingly (it would take too long to list everything that has disappeared in this way—institutions, values, individuals). It is, unfortunately, quite possible that we ourselves, as a species, already form part—in the form of cloning, computerization and the networks, for example—of this artificial survival, of this prolongation to perpetuity of something that has disappeared, but just keeps on and on disappearing. Whereas the whole art is to know how to disappear before dying and instead of dying.

At any rate, nothing just vanishes; of everything that disappears there remain traces. The problem is what remains when everything has disappeared. It's a bit like Lewis Carroll's Cheshire Cat, whose grin still hovers in the air after the rest of him has vanished. Or like the judgement of God: God disappears, but he leaves behind his judgement. Now, a cat's grin is already something terrifying, but the grin without the cat is even more terrifying . . . And God's

judgement is terrifying in itself, but the judgement of God without God . . .

We may thus suppose that everything that disappears—institutions, values, prohibitions, ideologies, even ideas—continues to lead a clandestine existence and exert an occult influence, as was said of the ancient gods who, in the Christian era, assumed the form of demons. Everything that disappears seeps back into our lives in infinitesimal doses, often more dangerous than the visible authority that ruled over us. In our age of tolerance and transparency, prohibitions, controls and inequalities disappear one by one, but only the better to be internalized in the mental sphere. We might even suppose ourselves to be following in the tracks of our previous lives, not to speak of the Unconscious. Nothing ever disappears. But let's not get into parapsychology. Let's stay with psychology and look a little at the disappearance of the subject, which is, more or less, the mirror image of the disappearance of the real.

And in fact the subject—the subject as agency of will, of freedom, of representation; the subject of power, of knowledge, of history—is disappearing, but it leaves its ghost behind, its narcissistic double, more or less as the Cat left its grin hovering. The subject disappears, gives way to a diffuse, floating, insubstantial subjectivity, an ectoplasm that envelops everything and transforms everything into an immense sounding board for a disembodied, empty consciousness—all things radiating out from a subjectivity without object; each monad, each molecule caught in the toils of a definitive narcissism, a perpetual image-playback. This is the image of an end-of-world subjectivity, a subjectivity for an end of the world from which the subject as such has disappeared, no longer having anything left to grapple with. The subject is the victim of this fateful turn of events, and, in a sense, it no longer has anything standing over against it—neither objects, nor the real, nor the Other.

Our greatest adversaries now threaten us only with their disappearance.

THE GREAT DISAPPEARANCE IS NOT, then, simply that of the virtual transmutation of things, of the *mise en abyme* of reality, but that of the division of the subject to infinity, of a serial pulverization of consciousness into all the interstices of reality. We might say, at a pinch, that consciousness (the will, freedom) is everywhere; it merges with the course of things and, as a result, becomes superfluous. This is the analysis Cardinal Ratzinger himself made of religion: a religion which accommodates to the world, which attunes itself to the (political, social . . .) world, becomes superfluous. It is for the same reason—because it became increasingly merged with objective banality—that art, ceasing to be different from life, has become superfluous.

One might argue, alternatively, that there have been some positive disappearances: of violence,



threats, illness or death, but we know that everything repressed or eliminated in this way results in a malign, viral infiltration of the social and individual body.

IT IS, THEREFORE, IMPOSSIBLE to assign disappearance—disappearance as form—to some particular purpose or end (any more than we can with appearance indeed), either in the order of Good or in the order of Evil. Apart from all the phantasies we maintain around it—and in the entirely justified hope of seeing a certain number of things disappear once and for all—we must give disappearance back its prestige or, quite simply, its power, its impact. We must reinvest it not as a final but as an immanent dimension—I would even say as a viral dimension of existence. Things live only on the basis of their disappearance, and, if one wishes to interpret them with entire lucidity, one must do so as a function of their disappearance. There is no better analytical grid.

IN CONCLUSION, I SHALL STRESS the total ambiguity of our relation to the real and its disappearance. Behind every image, something has disappeared. And that is the source of its fascination. Behind virtual reality in all its forms (telematics, IT, digitization, etc.), the real has disappeared. And that is what fascinates everyone. According to the official version, we worship the real and the reality principle, but—and this is the source of all the current suspense—is it, in fact, the real we worship, or its disappearance?

We may, then, take the same general situation—exactly the same—either as a curse, as the commonplace critical version has it, or as a pleasure into which we can retreat, as a happy eventuality so to speak.

A contradictory twofold postulate that cannot, in any way, be resolved.

THE FINEST ILLUSTRATION of this systematic vanishing of a reality, whose twilight, as it were, one

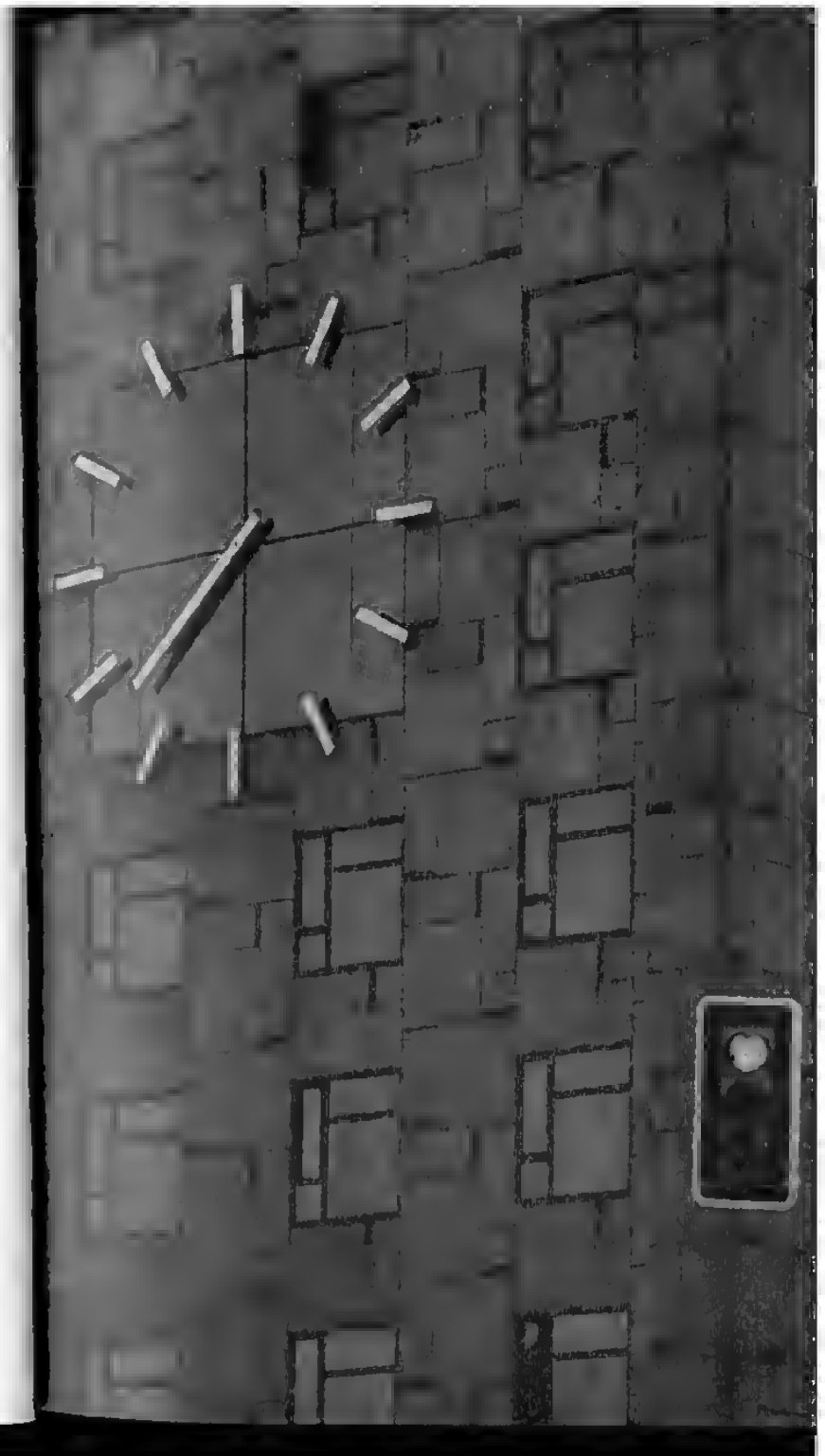
savours, would be the current destiny of the image, of the disappearance of the image in the inexorable move from the analogical to the digital. The destiny of the image being exemplary—for the invention of the technical image in all its forms is our last great invention in the unrelenting quest for an 'objective' reality, an objective truth to be mirrored to us by technology . . . It would seem that the mirror has got caught up in the game and has transformed everything into a virtual, digital, computerized, numerical 'reality'—the destiny of the image being merely the tiny detail of this anthropological revolution.

ON THE HEGEMONIC AND THE DIGITAL . . .

When, from an excess of reality, everything disappears thanks to the deployment of a limitless mental or material technology, when human beings are capable of fulfilling all their potentialities, then, by that very token, they enter a world that expels them. For, if it is characteristic

of living beings not to fulfil all their potentialities, it is of the essence of technical objects to exhaust all of theirs and to deploy them despite all opposition, despite human beings themselves, which implies, in the longer or shorter term, the disappearance of humans. At the end of this irresistible process, leading to a perfectly objective universe, which is, as it were, the supreme stage of reality, there is no subject any longer; there is no one there to see it. That world no longer has need of us, nor of our representation. And there is, indeed, no longer any possible representation of it.

TO ILLUSTRATE THIS TRANSITION to the hegemonic, there is no finer analogy than that of the photograph that has become digital, being liberated at a single stroke from both the negative and the real world. And the consequences of both these things are incalculable, though on different scales, of course. This marks the end of a singular



presence for the object, since it may now be digitally constructed. And the end of the singular moment of the photographic act, since the image can now be immediately erased or reconstructed. And the end of the irrefutable testimony of the negative. Both the time-lag and distance disappear at the same time, and with them that blank between object and image that was the negative. The traditional photograph is an image produced by the world, which, thanks to the medium of film, still involves a dimension of representation. The digital image is an image that comes straight out of the screen and becomes submerged in the mass of all the other images from screens. It is of the order of flow, and is a prisoner to the automatic operation of the camera. When calculation and the digital win out over form, when software wins out over the eye, can we still speak of photography?

THIS IS NOT MERELY AN EPISODE in the history of technology: with this turn to the digital, the whole of analogue photography, the image in its entirety—conceived as the convergence of the light from the object with the light from the gaze—is sacrificed, is doomed forever. As digitization advances, soon there will no longer be any film, any light-sensitive surface onto which things inscribed themselves negatively. There will only be an image software package, a digital effect running to the billionth of a pixel and, at the same time, unprecedented ease of picture-taking, of image-playback and of the photo-synthesis⁹ of anything whatever. Metaphorically, the sophistication of the play of presence and absence, of appearance and disappearance—all the sophistication of the photographic act—disappears with the coming of the digital (the photographic act causes the object in its 'reality' to vanish for a moment; there is nothing of the sort in the virtual image, nor its digital capture—

not to mention the magic of the image's emergence as it is developed).

It is the world and our vision of the world that is changed by this.

PARTICULARLY IN THESE RECENT TIMES of ultra-rapid technological progress, the absurd idea has emerged of 'libetating' the real by means of the image, and of 'liberating' the image by means of the digital. The 'liberation' of the real and of the image are said to be effects of profusion and proliferation. This is to forget the degree of challenge and risk involved in the photographic act, the fragility and ambivalence of the relation to the object—the 'failure' of the gaze, we might say. That is all essential to photography—and it is a rare thing! You cannot liberate photography!

Once again, this is all just one tiny example of what is happening on a massive scale in all fields—particularly in the fields of thought, concepts, language and representation. The same

destiny of digitization looms over the world of the mind and the whole range of thought.

WE HAVE HERE THE SAME SCENARIO, term for term: with programmes based on the 0/1 binary construct, which is a kind of integral calculus, the entire symbolic articulation of language and thought disappears. Soon there will no longer be any thought-sensitive surface of confrontation, any suspension of thought between illusion and reality. There will be no blanks any more, no silences, no contradiction—just a single continuous flow, a single integrated circuit. And computer intelligence lends itself to—or, more accurately, like the digital in the case of the image, forces us into—the same facility, the same capriciousness of production and accumulation, of 'photo-synthesis' of the whole of the possible real. The—gigantic—illusion is to confuse thought with a proliferation of calculations or photography with a proliferation of images. And the further we go in that direction, the further



we shall be from the secret—and the pleasure—of both. The exorbitant privilege granted to the brain, not just in the neurosciences but in all fields, is symptomatic of this. Not to mention Le Lay's recent proposal on engineering the amount of human brain time available (for Coca-Cola adverts), which was exceeded in involuntary cynicism and ridiculousness by the proposal of the Head of Cultural Affairs of the Paris City Hall, Christophe Girard: 'What we want is to make the brain available, not for advertising and capital, but for Culture and Creation!'

However this may be, what is totally wrong-headed is to see the brain as a receiver, a synaptic terminal, a screen for brain imagery in real time (in this sense, it is, at a pinch, less absurd to correlate a 'functional' brain with an advertising market than to see it as the vehicle for 'Creation!'). In short, in keeping with the aberrant assumption of the whole of communication theory ('We are all unwitting receivers and transmitters'), once you model the brain on computers, seeing it as a super

machine in the image of other digital machines, then the brain and (virtual) reality simply interface, operate in a loop with, or mirror, each other in accordance with a single programme—the whole resulting in what we call Artificial Intelligence or AI. Within this framework, in which we have definitively privileged the brain as a strategic source of thought—at the expense of any other form of intelligence, particularly the intelligence of Evil, which is relegated to the zone of useless functions—we assure it of Hegemony, of hegemonic power—precisely in the likeness of the power that reigns in the geopolitical sphere. The same monopoly, the same pyramidal synthesis of powers.

ALL THIS DESCRIBES an overall hegemonic process, and this is why the digression on photography and the digital can serve as the micro-model for a generalized analysis of hegemony. For that hegemony is nothing other than the reabsorption of any negativity in human affairs, the reduction

to the simplest unitary formula, the formula to which there is no alternative, 0/1—pure difference of potential, into which the aim is to have all conflicts vanish digitally.

THE VIOLENCE DONE TO THE IMAGE

The ultimate violence done to the image is the violence of the cgi—computer-generated image—which emerges *ex nihilo* from numerical calculation and the computer.

This puts an end even to the imagining of the image, to its fundamental 'illusion' since, in computer generation, the referent no longer exists and there is no place even for the real to 'take place', being immediately produced as Virtual Reality.

Digital production erases the image as *analogon*; it erases the real as something capable of being 'imagined'. The photographic act, this moment of disappearance of both the subject and the object in the same instantaneous confrontation—the

shutter release abolishing the world and the gaze for a moment, a syncope, a *petite mort* that triggers the machinic performance of the image—disappears in digital, numerical processing.

All this leads inevitably to the death of photography as an original medium. With the analogue image it is the essence of photography that disappears. That image still attested to the live presence of a subject to an object—one last reprieve from the dissemination and digital tidal wave that lies in store for us.

The problem of reference was already an almost insoluble one: how is it with the real? How is it with representation? But when, with the Virtual, the referent disappears, when it disappears into the technical programming of the image, when there is no longer the situation of a real world set over against a light-sensitive film (it is the same with language, which is like the sensitive film of ideas), then there is, ultimately, no possible representation any more.



THERE IS WORSE. What distinguishes the analogue image is that it is the place where a form of disappearance, of distance, of 'freezing' of the world plays itself out. That nothingness at the heart of the image which Warhol spoke of.

Whereas, in the digital image, or, more generally, the cgi, there is no negative any longer, no 'time lapse'. Nothing dies or disappears there. The image is merely the product of an instruction and a programme, aggravated by automatic dissemination from one medium to the other: computer, mobile phone, TV screen, etc.—the automatic nature of the network—responding to the automatic nature of the construction of the image.

So should we save absence? Should we save the void and this nothingness at the heart of the image?

At any rate, removing meaning brings out the essential point: namely, that the image is more important than what it speaks about—just as language is more important than what it signifies.

BUT IT MUST ALSO REMAIN ALIEN to itself in some way. Not reflect [on] itself as medium, not take itself for an image. It must remain a fiction, a fable and hence echo the irresolvable fiction of the event. It must not be caught in its own trap or let itself be imprisoned in the image-playback.

The worst thing, in our view, is just this impossibility of a world without image-playback—a world that is always caught, captured, filmed and photographed even before it is seen. This is a mortal danger for the 'real' world, but also for the image, since, when it merges with the real and simply immerses itself in the real and re-cycles it, there no longer is any image—at least not as exception, as illusion, as parallel world. In the visual flow in which we are currently submerged, there isn't even the time to become an image.

I dream of an image that would be the *écriture automatique* of the world's singularity, as dreamt of by the Iconoclasts in the famous Byzantine controversy. They contended that only

the image in which the divinity was directly present—as in the veil of the Holy Face¹⁰—was authentic—an *écriture automatique* of the divine face without any human hand having intervened ('acheiropoietic'), through a kind of transfer-printing analogous to the negative of the photographic film. On the other hand, they violently rejected all icons produced by human hand ('cheiropoietic') which for them were mere simulacra of the divine.

By contrast, the photographic act is, in a sense, 'acheiropoietic'. As automatic light-writing that neither passes through the real nor the idea of the real, photography may be said, by this automaticity, to be the prototype of a literalness of the world, with no interference from human hand. The world producing itself as radical illusion, as pure trace, without any simulation, without human intervention and, above all, not as truth, for, if there is one supreme product of the human mind, that product is truth and objective reality.

THERE IS GREAT AFFECTION in ascribing meaning to the photographic image. To do so is to make objects strike a pose. And things themselves begin to pose in the light of meaning as soon as they feel a subject's gaze upon them.

HAVE WE NOT ALWAYS had the deep-seated phantasy of a world that would go on without us? The poetic temptation to see the world in our absence, free of any human, all-too-human will? The intense pleasure of poetic language lies in seeing language operating on its own, in its materiality and literality, without transiting through meaning—this is what fascinates us. It is the same with anagrams or anamorphoses, with the 'figure in the carpet'.¹¹ The Vanishing Point of Language.

MAY NOT PHOTOGRAPHY also be said to function as 'revealing', in the two—technical and metaphysical—senses of the word, of the 'image in the carpet'? The Vanishing Point of the Picture.



SERIALITY IS SOMETHING almost inevitable in photography, for the reason that the camera (especially the digital camera) tends towards the infinite exploitation of its possibilities. For lack of an intuiting of the detail of the world, for want of fully plumbing its meaning and exhausting its appearances, the serial digital image fills the void by self-multiplication. In the limit case which is our present condition, we arrive at an unstoppable series of shots.

But this is no longer a photograph and, literally speaking, it is no longer even an image. These shots may be said, rather, to be part of the murder of the image. That murder is being perpetrated continually by all the images that accumulate in series, in 'thematic' sequences, which illustrate the same event *ad nauseam*, which think they are accumulating, but are, in fact, cancelling each other out, till they reach the zero degree of information.

There is a violence done to the world in this way, but there is also a violence done to the

image, to the sovereignty of images. Now, an image has to be sovereign; it has to have its own symbolic space. If they are living images—'aesthetic' quality is not at issue here—they ensure the existence of that symbolic space by eliminating an infinite number of other spaces from it. There is a perpetual rivalry between (true) images. But it is exactly the opposite today with the digital, where the parade of images resembles the sequencing of the genome.

THE OPPOSITE PERSPECTIVE would be photography in its pure abstraction—*cosa mentale*—envisioning an already photographed world in one's head—without there being any need to materialize it in actual shots—by imagining the world precisely as the lens transforms it. The inner ecstasy of photography, as it were.

A total de-regulation of the image—photography can get lost in a mindboggling fragmentation, in a technical delirium of visibility at

all costs, where everything insists on appearing on a fractal or microscopic scale. It's not a matter of disappearing into the play of forms any more, but of an automatic substitution, where the world itself zaps from one image to the other in precisely the same way as the individual can dissolve himself into the mental diaspora of the networks and thereby attain a definitive spectrality.

The ultimate stage of this de-regulation is the cgi. From faked photos of the dying Diana to studio-manufactured TV reports, the immediate live shot, taken at an irrevocable moment, is past and gone—last glimmer of actuality in a virtual dimension where images no longer have the slightest connection with time.

In the virtual image there's no longer anything of that punctual exactitude, that *punctum* in time which is the 'point' when the analogue image was made. In the past, in the days of the 'real world', so to speak, photography was, as Barthes argued, witness to an insuperable

absence, to something that had been present once and for all time. For its part, the digital photo is in real time and bears witness to something that did not take place, but whose absence signifies nothing.

In this digital liberalization of the photographic act, in this impersonal process in which the medium itself generates mass-produced images, with no other intercession but the technical, we can see seriality in its consummate form. In the field of images this is, as it were, the equivalent of AI. We may thus regard the images taken by a digital camera generally as an infinite series with all the possibilities of manipulation, play, correction, image-playback and all the things that are unthinkable in the 'analogue' world. It is also the end of any suspense: the image is there at the same time as the scene—a ridiculous promiscuity (what a marvel, by contrast, is the slow gradual rising to the surface of the image in the Polaroid camera!). This is what the digital lacks: the time



of emergence, failing which it is merely a random segment of the universal pixellization, which no longer has anything to do with the gaze, nor with the play of the negative, the play of distance. A new view of the world, globalization's view of the world; the subjection of everything to a single programme, the subjection of all images to a single 'genome'. This is why it is a mistake to regard the move to digital as a mere technical advance, as a superior form of automation or even, indeed, a final liberation of the image.

For this really is the last straw, this aspiration to clear the way, with the digital, for the integral image, free from any real-world constraints. And we would not be forcing the analogy if we extended this same revolution to human beings in general, free now, thanks to this digital intelligence, to operate within an integral individuality, free from all history and subjective constraints . . .

At the end-point of this rise of the machine, in which all human intelligence is encapsulated—a machine which is now assured of total autonomy as a result—it is clear that mankind exists only at the cost of its own death. It becomes immortal only by paying the price of its technological disappearance, of its inscription in the digital order (the mental diaspora of the networks).

'THE SYMBOL OF A LIVING DISPERSION, the ideal spider, which spins its web and is simultaneously spun by its web.' Or better still, 'I am not the spider who weaves the web, and I am not even a fly caught in the web. I am the web itself, streaming off in all directions with no centre and no self that I can call my own.'¹²

But this is the open form of immortality and in reality, so far as the human species is concerned, the choice has been made and it is embodied in the supremacy of Artificial Intelligence.

IT IS AT THE OUTER LIMITS of this systematic disappearance, which has, it would seem, been universally accepted, but whose dynamic ultimately remains mysterious (What do digital sheep dream of? as Philip K. Dick might have asked), that some troubling paradoxical questions arise:

1. Is everything doomed to disappear—or, more precisely, hasn't everything already disappeared? (which connects up with the very distant paradox from a philosophy that never was: WHY IS THERE NOTHING RATHER THAN SOMETHING?)

2. Why isn't everything universal?

3. We are fascinated by the phantasm of an integral reality, by the alpha and omega of digital programming. The real is the leitmotif and obsession of all discourses. But are we not far less fascinated by the real than by its vanishing, its ineluctable disappearance?

4. Which gives rise to the truly mysterious question: how does this irresistible global power

succeed in undifferentiating the world, in wiping out its extreme singularity? And how can the world be so vulnerable to this liquidation, this dictatorship of integral reality, and how can it be fascinated by it—not exactly fascinated by the real but by the disappearance of reality? There is, however, a corollary to this: what is the source of the fragility of this global power, of its vulnerability to minor events, to events that are insignificant in themselves ('rogue events', terrorism, but also the pictures from Abu Ghraib, etc.)?

DOUBTLESS, if we are to avoid these insoluble questions, we have to refer to that other anthropological revolution, exactly antithetical to our current digital 'revolution', that is never taken into consideration (we might even say it has never really been taken into consideration, except in a number of rapidly sacrificed heresies).

DUALITY. The inviolable golden rule of duality. And there's no need to go back to



anthropology's roots to rediscover this radical element of human being; it is present everywhere: it is what not only leaves the questions posed above eternally in suspense, but also eternally thwarts human undertakings (all based on synthesis, integrality and the deliberate forgetting of all refractory forms, of everything that cannot or will not be integrated or reconciled . . .).

Fundamentally, the NORMAL human being always lives in a state of dependency or counter-dependency; he is dependent on his model (whatever it may be: model of action, social or imaginary project), but, at the same time, permanently challenging that model. He is motivated and counter-motivated in the same movement. There is no need for psychology or psychoanalysis or, indeed, any human science for this. These sciences exist only to reconcile the irreconcilable. As a consequence, human beings do always both what they need to for their model to succeed and all that is necessary for it to fail. Here again, there's

no need of any weakening or perversion or death drive. It is from their primal duality that human beings derive this antagonistic energy. This is the normal human being and everything that sets about reconciling him with himself and finding a solution to the questions raised above is of the order of superstition and mystification.¹³

The ABNORMAL individual today is the one who now lives only in a unilateral positive adherence to what he is or what he does. Total subjection and adjustment¹⁴ (the perfectly normalized being). Countless individuals have gone over to reality, to their own reality, by eliminating all consideration of the dual and the insoluble. And the mystery of this positive crystallization, of this suspension of doubt about the real—necessarily real—world remains entire. This raises the whole question of the intelligence of Evil.

We are simplified by technical manipulation.

And this simplification goes off on a crazy course when we reach digital manipulation.

What becomes at this point of the ventriloquacy of Evil?¹⁵ It is the same with the radicalism of yore: when it deserts the individual, reconciled with himself and homogenized by the good offices of the digital, and when all critical thinking has disappeared, radicalism passes into things. The ventriloquacy of Evil passes into technology itself.

For duality can be neither eliminated nor liquidated—it is the rule of the game, the rule of a kind of inviolable pact that seals the reversibility of things.

If their own duplicity deserts human beings, then the roles are reversed: it is the machine that goes gaga, that falters and becomes perverse, diabolic, ventriloquous. The duplicity merrily goes over to the other side.

JEAN BAUDRILLARD

If subjective irony disappears—and it disappears in the play of the digital—then irony becomes objective. Or it becomes silence.

IN THE BEGINNING WAS THE WORD. It was only afterwards that the Silence came.

The end itself has disappeared . . .

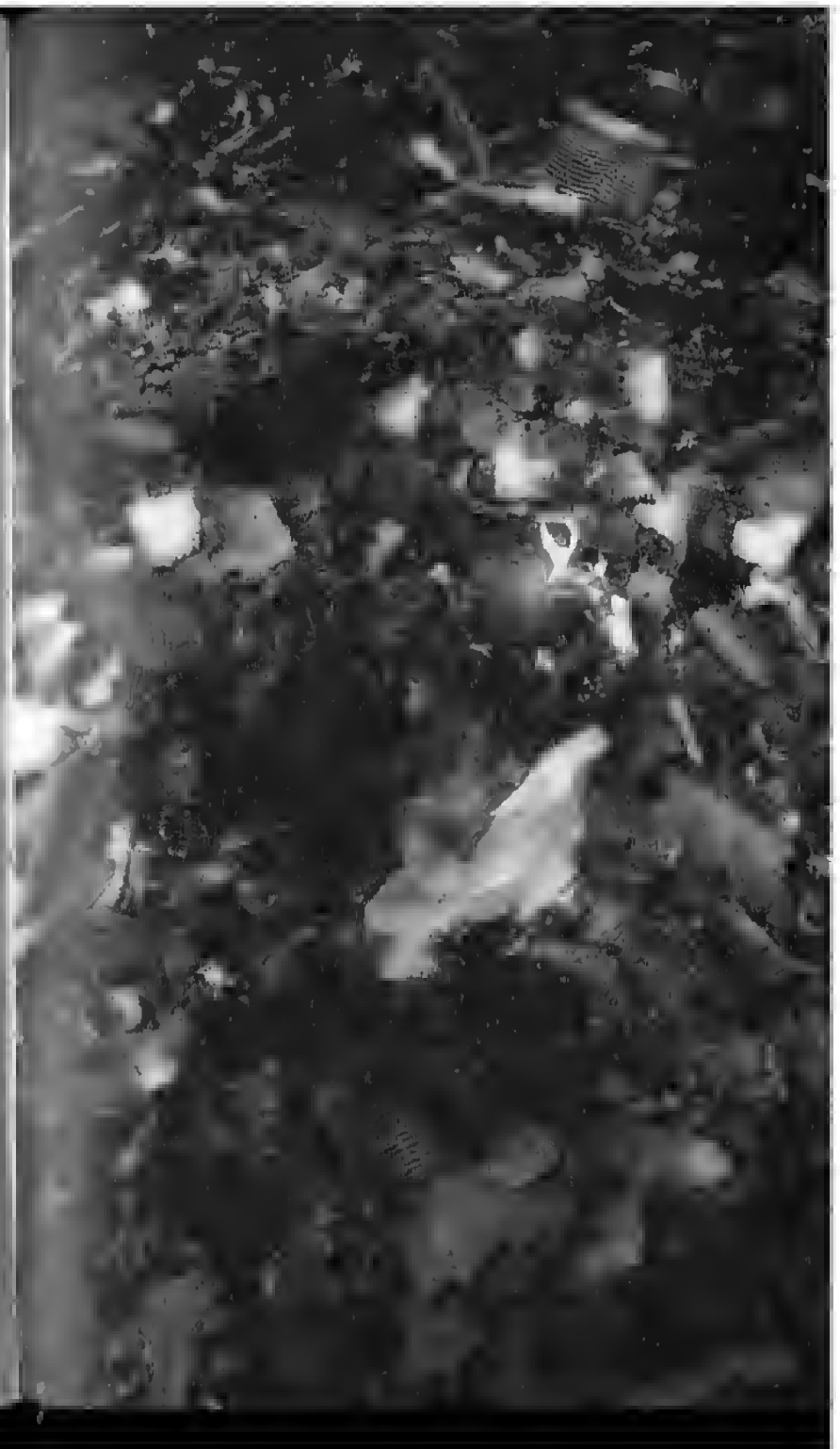
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Notes

- 1 Quoted from Jean Baudrillard and Enrique Valiente Noailles, *Exiles from Dialogue* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), p. 135.
- 2 Macedonio Fernandez, *Papeles de Recienvenido. Continuación de lo nada* [Newcomer's Papers. Continuation of the Nothing] (Paris: José Corti, 1992), p. 157.
- 3 Baudrillard and Noailles, *Exiles from Dialogue*, pp. 134–5.
- 4 This appears to be a slight deformation of the third stanza of Raymond Queneau's poem 'L'explication des métaphores' [Explanation of Metaphors]. [Trans.]
- 5 The reference is to 'The Discovery of the Archimedean Point' in Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988 [1958]), pp. 257–68. Arendt writes of 'the modern age's triumphal world alienation' (p. 264). [Trans.]
- 6 'The owl of minerva begins its flight only with the onset of dusk.' Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of*

- Right* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 23. [Trans.]
- 7 Günther Anders, *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen*, 2 vols [The Outdatedness of Human Beings] (Munich: Verlag C. H. Beck, 1956, 1980). [Trans.]
- 8 The reference is to a passage from Elias Canetti's work, *The Human Province* (New York: Seabury Press, 1978). See Jean Baudrillard, *The Illusion of the End* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994), p. 1. [Trans.]
- 9 French: '*de photo-synthèse de n'importe quoi*'. Baudrillard plays here on the notion of '*une image de synthèse*', which is the French term for a computer-generated image (cgi). [Trans.]
- 10 St Veronica was said to have wiped the face of Christ with a veil while he was on the way to Calvary, thereby imprinting the cloth with the image of Christ's face. [Trans.]
- 11 A reference to a short story by Henry James, *The Figure in the Carpet* (London: Martin Secker, 1919). [Trans.]



- 12 Baudrillard quotes this latter passage from James Elkins without attribution. [Trans.]
- 13 Fortunately, as Stanislaw Lec points out, we can trust in the intelligence of human beings. There are many things they do not manage to understand.
- 14 The French term *arrondissement* also translates Martin Heidegger's concept *Gestell* (enframing) and there are perhaps overtones of that notion here. [Trans.]
- 15 *L'entriquoacité* seems to be a coinage, combining ventriloquism [*la ventriloquie*] and loquacity [*la loquacité*]. [Trans.]